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HJALMAR HJORTH BOYESEN.

Few pleasanter tasks can fall to a reviewer than the endeavor to estimate aright and to place in their true light the services to American letters of Professor Boyesen, that genial foreigner who in the comparatively brief space of his life in America, some twenty-six years, made himself so wholly one of ourselves by his broad and catholic sympathies that others might sometimes regret that he had not preserved more of his native Norseland. For on the whole as I look back over the varied fields of his labor I think we shall remember him best as a skillful gardener who grafted into our generous American stock the burly humor of his fjords and mountain pines, that indefinable foreign savor that lends a peculiar charm not only to his Norwegian stories but to many of his American pictures also. Even his critical work, and still more his social essays, gain in interest though not perhaps in value, from the fact that they are the views of a foreigner bent on being a thorough American. For although Professor Boyesen is best known from his work in fiction, novels, stories, and juvenile books, and though he will probably continue to be so, his was a most manifold literary activity. At first he cultivated poetry with delight, and indeed it never lost its charm for him. Then he poured out for years a small fire of magazine articles on most varied subjects, while he occasionally emphasized their importance by the heavier fire of his novels and critical volumes. His life must have been a very busy one, but I seem to feel through it all that work was to him less a toil or a task than the recreation and overflow of a strong, full mind.

Of Professor Boyesen's life I know little save what any one may gather from the notices published at his death. Somewhat of this I will repeat briefly here that we may understand his work the better through the conditions that affected and in some degree evoked it. For while every

literary work must stand for itself, it is easier to see what it is if we can see how it came to be, though this idea has been pushed perhaps too far by Sainte-Beuve, certainly too far by Taine.

A little fishing village on the southern coast of Norway, Frederiksvaern by name, was the scene of Boyesen's birth, the date September 23, 1848. The spirit of the time often affects the gestation of genius, and it will be noted that 1848 marks a high tide in the democratic aspirations of all Europe, some breath which may have been infused into the child. A studious disposition he might have inherited from his father, who was an instructor in the Naval Academy, but the impressions of his childhood, in their way as deep and as lasting as those of George Sand by the Indre, were imprinted at the home of his mother's father, the wild and weirdly beautiful Sagna-fjord, whence as a young student he carried to Christiania ineffaceable pictures from whence he drew many, and among them surely his most charming pages.

At the University of Christiania Boyesen was graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy in 1868 and early in the next year he turned his face westward to the new American Canaan. His father had visited the United States and counseled the step, but the young doctor's success was not at first speedy or brilliant. He landed in New York, whence he went to New England and presently to Chicago where he made a brief venture in journalism. Traces of this year of wandering can be found in "Falconberg," in "The Mammon of Unrighteousness," and elsewhere. Journalism was uncongenial to him, however, and that autumn he resigned it for teaching, to which and to authorship he devoted the remainder of his life. In this career his first step was a modest instructorship at Urbana, a Swedenborgian institution in Ohio. The post must have been inconceivably uncongenial, and it was natural that in his mental isolation his mind should revert to his native land beyond the seas. But these broodings of a man sick for

home were not in vain, for to them we owe the pathetic charm of "Gunnar," a story of Norway, which many, myself among them, believe to be that work of his that best deserves a permanent place in our literature.

"Gunnar" began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1873, when already Dr. Boyesen feeling the need of deeper study and the intimate contact with a riper culture for the work he saw before him, had crossed the Atlantic once more and made his literary pilgrimage to the shrines of German learning, whence, as from his life at Urbana, he drew material for latter novels and returned in 1874 to a post already awaiting him at Cornell University, where under changing titles he taught and wrote on German language and literature till 1880, when, feeling perhaps that he was not duly appreciated, he resigned his professorship and came to New York with the best of all capital, a justified confidence in himself. He was, and he knew he was, too valuable a man to be suffered to rust unused in that great emporium of talent and the next year found him teaching in Columbia College where soon after he became professor first of German, then of the Germanic languages and literatures, and so continued till his death, October 4th, 1895.

During all these years, while he was constantly reaching a greater number of students, he was extending the circle of his readers also, both among scholars and the multitude, and made his influence increasingly felt at professorial gatherings where his colleagues found his remarks almost always both original and practical. Here as in the lecture-room he never suffered his wide reading to lapse into bookishness or to obscure his varied experience of active life. Yet I have heard it said by some who prized his instruction highly that he acted as a stimulus rather than as a guide, that he sought less to train disciples of his own methods than to provoke independent thought, and so while he helped greatly and most generously those who showed independent energy, the average student might have profited more from a less brilliant instructor.

A friend has said of Boyesen that it was his ambition to be known as a poet, but he deceived himself as so many others have done. The favorite child of our genius, as well as of our family is not apt to be the strongest. For the higher reaches of poetry he had neither the temperament nor the necessary command of the language in which he wrote. The last statement may demand some explanation. Professor Boyesen had a remarkable command of English. He wrote prose full of nervous energy and often of surprising vigor, though as I shall be constrained to show presently, never up to the very last without rhetorical blemishes and an occasional use of words that in one to the manner born would be a lapse of taste. But these faults, venial in prose, are mortal to verse where convention plays an essential part and life-long familiarity alone can attune the ear to catch the hidden concords of sound and sense and give to each theme its proper orchestration. So the poetic thoughts of the "Idyls of Norway" are too often obscured by limping prosody and diction, nor does the general level of excellence rise materially above the mediocre. *Omnes non omnia*. Professor Boyesen's talent lies elsewhere.

His prose work divides itself naturally into two major categories, fiction¹ and literary criticism,² and into the minor divisions of juveniles,³ history,⁴ and essays,⁵ with which must be classed a multitude of contributions to periodicals on most varied subjects. Of the longer novels "Gunnar" alone

¹ The chronology of the novels is as follows: *Gunnar*, 1874, *A Norseman's Pilgrimage*, 1875, *Falconberg*, 1879, *Queen Titania*, 1881, *A Daughter of the Philistines*, 1883, *The Light of Her Countenance*, 1889, *The Mammon of Unrighteousness*, 1891, *A Golden Calf*, 1892, *Social Strugglers*, 1893. To these must be added the collections of stories under the titles: *Tales from Two Hemispheres*, 1876, *Ilka on the Hill-top and Other Tales*, 1881, *Vagabond Tales*, 1889, *Against Heavy Odds* and *A Fearless Trio*, 1890, *Norseland Tales*, 1894.

² *Goethe and Schiller with a Commentary on Faust*, 1879, *Essays on German Literature*, 1892, *A Commentary on the Writings of Henrik Ibsen*, 1893, *Essays on Scandinavian Literature*, 1895.

³ *The Modern Vikings*, 1888. *Boyhood in Norway*, 1892.

⁴ *The Story of Norway*, 1886.

⁵ *Literary and Social Silhouettes*, 1894.

deals entirely with the author's native land, the "Norseman's Pilgrimage" is a cosmopolitan tale with German, Norse and American characters and the scene laid for the greater part in Germany, the result doubtless of his student year there which was drawn upon also for "A Daring Fiction," one of the shorter stories. The other novels have their scenes in America, sometimes in our native Philistia, sometimes among the Norwegian immigrants of our middle west. The same general division will apply to the shorter stories save that the social or political satire of American life is much less prominent. Here as there the cosmopolitan tales are distinctly the weakest while the strongest work is found among the "Vagabond" emigrants and in the stories of Norway.

A recent critic of Boyesen's novels says that "his stories possess a sweetness, a tenderness and a drollery that are fascinating and yet they are no more attractive than they are strong." This and more is true of "Gunnar," but after reading some three thousand pages of Professor Boyesen's fiction I should demur a little to all these adjectives in a general characterization of it. The volumes leave rather on my mind a impression of burly humor, deep but not very delicate sentiment, a satire sound and sane but rather philistine and often a little heavy, with a refreshing combativeness that seems more at home with the broadsword than with the rapier and not unfrequently suggests the quarter-staff. If I may be permitted to be wholly frank with regard to the limitations of one whose work I enjoy I should say that while himself far from vulgar he had not an instinctive shrinking from vulgarity and could not feel himself the æsthetic shiver that he unconsciously gave sometimes to his cultured readers. And this lack of delicate sensitiveness appears also in his style and language. He never cared to acquire that "infinite capacity of taking pains" which is said to be an essential attribute of literary genius. Indeed in this regard the sins of his youth are not his worst.

I must explain and illustrate what I mean at the risk of

seeming to stress unduly matters of detail individually insignificant but important for psychological criticism and important also to the integrity of our language. One may admire Professor Boyesen's novels and yet regret that like a certain German in "Ilka on the Hill-top," he also "took a great pride in the little French he had picked up," and obtruded it in season and out of season, in a really distressing fashion, the more as it is very frequently misspelled and mis-accented. For this of course his proof-readers must share the blame, but what can be said for such a sentence as that which tells of "a mal-à-propos (*sic*) remark implying the remotest *souçon* of personal criticism or trifling *gaucherie*?" Why should he persistently call the garment that he has such frequent cause to mention a *robe de nuit* or for variety, "a light cambric *negligée*"? This sort of thing is painful to those who prefer to write one language at a time, and so too, it is annoying to read of an "Opera Platz" or of *moire antiques*, and it is a little confusing to have *corps* consistently called *chores*.¹ These errors in foreign words are a petty thing, but they swarm in all the novels, where also the reader is regaled with needless Latin citations; all of which suggests that English was not as distinct an entity in Professor Boyesen's mind as it is apt to be in that of a native writer.

It is an even more delicate matter to speak of Professor Boyesen's unconscious offenses against the conventionalities of taste in language and manners. As I have suggested, there is too much in his books about negligées that "clung airily to" his heroines, and these latter are too prone to "disrobe their lithe virginal forms" *coram publico*. Somehow we feel we would as lief not know the lady who was "enveloped in an exquisite tantalizing perfume" at a dinner in Gramercy Park, though our Puritanic taste would probably elect her for a table companion rather than that supreme efflorescence of caddishness, Miss Copley of

¹ See *Mammon of Unrighteousness*, pp. 91, 183, 359, 373; and *A Norseman's Pilgrimage*, pp. 23, 68.

Boston, who was wont to appear o' nights at hotel windows in the usual "light negligées" and "engage in airy little chats" in "her peculiarly emphatic manner" with accidental male acquaintances with whom she took moonlight walks, "unconsciously pressing herself more tightly up" to her escort,¹ who later on is described as "coloring to the edge of his hair", though for less reason. Elsewhere we read of "furniture the ditto of which", and of a gentleman who "takes a merely æsthetic regard" in a lady and has the naïveté to find his phrase "striking". The efforts at dialect, negro and other, in "A Golden Calf" and in "Social Strugglers," are unique and awful. In short we may as well admit that Professor Boyesen's command of English, though remarkable in a foreigner, was by no means above obvious criticism.²

But all this is not what we seek nor what any one prizes in Professor Boyesen's stories. Let me be wholly frank with you, my readers. Are you of those who shiver at a misplaced word or a phrase misapplied? Do you care for the manner of saying almost as much as for the thing said? Can you taste the drop of tar in the jar of honey? Does your delicate sensitiveness shrink at such linguistic lapses as have been noted? Then, perhaps, you had better not read Professor Boyesen's American stories. Are you offended if your author's sentiment occasionally just grazes the borderland of sentimentality? Then, perhaps, you had better forego the acquaintance of his Norwegians. But if, like nine readers out of ten, you have your heart in the right place, healthy nerves, and a steady literary stomach, you will find very much to enjoy in these books, and it will be a unique pleasure such as no other American author quite reproduces.

His novels are, as he himself says of the old Norse sagas: "Broad-breasted, storm-voiced, large molded, blus-

¹ See *A Norseman's Pilgrimage*, pp. 53, 57, 64, 119.

² Did space admit or the subject invite, a similar group of citations could be given from the literary essays including the very last.

tering". I know of none who has caught so well as he the spirit of a Scandinavian emigrant town, nestled perhaps somewhere in Michigan or Wisconsin, where old prejudice is still wrestling with radical intolerance. Here the author's own sympathies are undisguised. He is a democratic optimist with a strong anti-clerical bias which appears also in his satires of American political life, for his belief in the future in no way blinds him to present social abuses.

If "Falconberg", reflects Boyesen's experience in journalism, his life at Urbana supplied the materials for what is best in "The Mammon of Unrighteousness". Here the central theme is the almost pathetic belief of the mass of Americans in the saving grace of "learning." Obed Larkin, the founder of Larkin University, is the most striking figure in the book and perhaps the best drawn character in the whole range of Boyesen's fiction, for he is philistine to the core, the archetypal philistine, unswervingly true to his nature and his ideals. Faith in his University and in education, co-education too, is a cardinal fact in his being, only like that catholic spirited woman of Samaria, he worships he knows not what, and is wholly consistent with himself when he answers a deputation of his professors who come to ask for new books for the college library: "Read the books you've got and we'll talk of getting more." "The Mammon of Unrighteousness" is distinguished also by its keen and contemptuous satire of the vagaries of Temperance, for which men of temperate minds will be truly grateful, and our creaking political machine, which may be as good as we deserve, comes in also for shrewd comment. Yet one lays aside "The Mammon of Unrighteousness" amused but a little disheartened, and with a feeling that one has been lingering too long in vulgar company, with little to set off or relieve its rank monotony.

There are some who regard "Social Strugglers" as Boyesen's best novel, though why, unless it be that a man's last work ought to be his maturest, I hardly see. Like

the former book it is a social and political satire, and incidentally it shows much shrewdness in its dissection and exhibition of sham religious sentiment, which is as necessary for the first degree of social success, as are the fashionable fads for those somewhat further advanced toward their apotheosis among the Patriarchs. But here, again, the author fails to oppose effectively real social superiority to social pretense, and so, as before, we have to endure more gross vulgarity than is essential to his artistic purpose. In general the same would apply to the quite inferior "Golden Calf." As a whole, I should say that "The Mammon of Unrighteousness" was the most satisfactory of these stories, but the deepest impression is left by parts of "Falconberg."

If however we would enjoy Boyesen at his best we must let him take us to his native Norway, before time and new experiences have dimmed his memory and cooled his love. It is in the wooing of Gunnar and Ragnhild that there is most nature and most heart. Of course "Gunnar" shows that it is the work of an unpractised hand. It has manifold faults but they are those that we pardon most readily to youth and genius. As I read, I forget the weakness in the analysis of motive and the petty rhetorical errors, for I seem to catch the spirit of the old sagas with their naïve personifications of nature; I feel as though I were standing at the cradle of a myth. Indeed there are pages of "Gunnar" that any student of Teutonic antiquity may ponder with profit, for they show in a modern instance how the far off ancestors of this Norwegian boy came to conceive of Yggdrasil and of Niflheim. To be sure, here as so often in literature, the author manifests the defects of his qualities and falls on the side to which he inclines. When the professor attempts to be viking, he is apt to slip into the mock epic; when the travelled man of the world tries to be naïve, he is apt to mistake affected marivaudage for ingenuous simplicity. That is Professor Boyesen's danger, and he does not always avoid it. But for all that "Gunnar" is a very charming book, with a unique literary flavor. It is a book that deserves to live.

I fear it would have annoyed Professor Boyesen to have his best novel pronounced a belated blossom of Romanticism, for in his later critical work he was a rather iconoclastic champion of the opposite school in fiction. Yet there are pages in "Gunnar," chapters even, that might be by the author of the "Harzreise" in one of his elegiac moods, and there are others that suggest Novalis and his Blue Flower. Occasionally we do indeed have an attempt at exotic naturalism, but however minutely photographic this may chance to be, it has still the effect of imagination on the American reader, since its reality is as much beyond his control as were the Dalmatian metres of Mérimée's "Guzla" or the forests of Florida to the readers of Chateaubriand. Since any artistic work exists for us only as a mental picture, its naturalism or realism is relative not alone to the experience of its creator but to that of each observer. To me, for instance, Gunnar's Norwegian cottage and Falconberg's emigrant village are alike bits of realistic idealism. That is, they *seem* real and infused with a spiritual life. On the other hand portions of "Social Strugglers" are equally outside my experience (*Deo gratias*) and the more real Professor Boyesen makes them *seem*, the less I like his picture. His naturalism will be naturalistic to me only when his experience repeats mine, and the typical naturalist would be one who confined his fiction to the universals of human life, digestion, and the rest, as some of the followers of Zola once undertook to do.

But the influence of naturalism for good or ill was only a passing shadow on the mind of this young author of twenty-four. The world was not yet too much with him, and it is precisely this detachment that differentiates it from the American novels, and gives "Gunnar" the mint stamp of poet-gold. To the analyst in literature its healthy piney tonic may be no more interesting than the miasmatic effluvia of "Social Strugglers," but to readers whose souls are gasping in Philistia, it will seem as though Professor Boyesen in these later novels had given them Dead-Sea fruit where they had been taught to look for wild flowers.

In "Gunnar," just as in the Younger Edda, overflowing tenderness alternates with effervescing strength. Nowhere in this author's fiction is there such a bubbling of exuberant spirits as in the "skee race" of Gunnar and his rival. I feel the tingling of the icy air and my blood courses faster as I read of these wild sports that at the close translate themselves into antiphonal rhythmic staves. No Englishman could have given us the "skee race" nor the "wedding of the Wild-Duck." To re-read these is to forget all the short-comings one may have noted elsewhere and to feel that Professor Boyesen has earned the reward that Xerxes offered, he has invented a new pleasure.¹

I would gladly have kept my good wine till the last, but "Gunnar" was first in time and what follows may win our praise but hardly our enthusiasm. So far as I have followed Professor Boyesen's scattered essays, they are almost always vigorous and original, occasionally they are emphatically paradoxical. Those that are collected in the "Literary and Social Silhouettes" betray a lurking sympathy with the philistine mind, even in the essay on "Philistinism," and a little dash of the cynical gives a spice to his remarks on womankind. The literary papers are in general sane and catholic spirited, though they seem to me unjust to the survivors of Romanticism, or, as I would fain hope, not to the survivors of an outworn fashion but to the heralds of a regenerate fiction. But I will not pass this volume by without paying my tribute to his indignant repudiation of those critical journals, (or is it that critical journal?), that subject the opinions of reviewers to addition, subtraction, and silence lest they should not chime with pre-established harmonies. To say that the little volume is worthy of its company in Harper's series of American Essayists is to make other commendation superfluous.

No doubt that part of Professor Boyesen's literary labor

¹ Professor Boyesen's novels are published chiefly by the Scribners, the literary studies by the Scribners and Macmillans, the *Essays* by the Harpers.

to which he gave the most time and probably that to which he attached the greatest importance was his series of studies on German and Scandinavian literature which began with his essays on Goethe and Schiller in connection with his annual courses of lectures at Cornell, and was continued in three volumes of detached and somewhat disconnected articles. The studies of Goethe and Schiller certainly met a popular want for they passed through seven editions, but there was in them little scope for originality, so that here, more than in the independent fiction, the critic is obliged to consider rather the manner of the giving than the gift, and this condition is unfavorable to Professor Boyesen, as it is to every foreigner. But we have already dwelt enough on the ungracious subject of rhetoric and diction, and certainly his Commentary on "Faust" which has been thought worthy of a translation into German, is the most satisfactory treatment in English of that great poem though it is perhaps needlessly prolix and not wholly free from the danger of hiding the wood with the trees. Still beside the titanic strivings of the German commentators, who pile the Ossa of exegesis on the Pelion of illustration, his comparative brevity is a positive refreshment.

Essentially supplementary to this volume were the "Essays" of 1892, though among them is an excellent study of the German novel since 1850 and a sympathetic review of the work of Carmen Sylva. As a whole, however, these studies are more suggestive than satisfying. They are full of sound sense, but they lack literary finish and are occasionally inaccurate in details. I cannot help feeling that it was with some relief that the professor turned from these professional subjects to his own Scandinavia, though his commentary on Ibsen appears to have been written in some measure to meet a popular demand, and to have been cast with undue haste on the crest of an advancing wave. It certainly materially abridges the time necessary to enable aspiring blue-stockings to talk with the appearance of sense about this aging literary lion. But if we look to it for a

philosophic or systematic analysis of Ibsen's genius or literary methods we shall be disappointed, perhaps less because Professor Boyesen could not have given this to us than because, if given, it would not have met the demand for semi-digested literary pabulum. In such a case it is a merit to know one's public. He gives them a biographical introduction, "not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 't is enough," and then he takes Ibsen's various works in succession, summarizes their contents and draws specimens from them. There is indeed an occasional bit of explanatory criticism, and at the outset a few words of consolation to those youth who are discouraged because they cannot solve the mystery of existence and enjoy the instant plunging of the Sphinx "into the abysmal void." If a short cut to (and from) Ibsenism be desirable, and I devoutly think it is, Professor Boyesen's book fills the place worthily.

To the seven essays on Scandinavian literature I should give a much higher place. They are critically firm and delicate in their discrimination, though they show in their diction that to the very last the author was not quite at home with his English tools. Here the longest studies belong of right to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Esaias Tegnér, who between them occupy nearly two-thirds of the book, but possibly the most vigorous essays are those on Lie and on Brandès, especially the latter. A helpful paper is that on contemporary Danish literature, for it resumes attractively the results of a very wide reading.

Yet, on the whole, I doubt if any of this critical work, even the Commentary on "Faust," will outlast "Gunnar," the tribute of the young emigrant scholar to his native land. We are told that towards the close of his life Professor Boyesen became so ardent an American that he did not even care to speak the Norwegian language. But no man ever exchanged his fatherland without some loss in the transplanting, and to my mind, literature lost in the Norwegian more than it gained in the American.

BENJAMIN W. WELLS.